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ABSTRACT

Public demand for improvements in education has motivated a search for guidelines as to what constitutes satisfactory public instruction and learning. One of the latest and most significant manifestations of this has been the efforts within the individual states to define and adopt adequate reading and English language arts standards. This digest poses a series of questions to help review what researchers have found about the ways in which the various states have approached the issue, questions such as: Why Set State Standards for Education? What Have Researchers Concluded about Existing State Standards? How Should, and How Do, State Standards Affect Ways in Which Teachers Teach? What Constitutes Effective English Language Arts Standards? and State Standards: Where Are We Heading? (NKA)

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By

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A Review of State Reading and Language Arts Standards

By Stephen S. Gottlieb

Public demand for improvements in education has motivated a search for guidelines as to what constitutes satisfactory public instruction and learning. One of the latest and most significant manifestations of this has been efforts within the individual states to define and adopt adequate reading and English language arts standards. As the states began to adopt standards, researchers analyzed the ways in which the various states have approached the issue.

Why Set State Standards for Education?

Why should a school system, a particular school, or even an individual teacher not define satisfactory instruction methods or student achievement in a manner that recognizes local conditions? What is the benefit of a state setting forth certain milestones that teachers and students must accomplish? Where did the push for standards originate?

As the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's 1998 report on the subject notes, the impetus for standards for reading and other subjects resulted from a perception among some segments of the public that the level of scholastic achievement among public-school students left much room for improvement (Stotsky, 1997). In response to this, in the 1980s there was an effort on the federal level to bring about a set of voluntary national standards for the various academic subjects. During this same period, a joint project of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) was also undertaken, leading eventually to the issuance of a set of voluntary national guidelines. Within some of the states, there was a feeling that both the federal and association guidelines lacked a necessary level of either measurable specificity or academic rigor (Stotsky, 1997). Consequently, although state-level policymakers had traditionally left decisions about instructional content and standards to local schools, many now embarked on projects to define measurable standards by which to assess student achievement in their respective states (Wixson & Dutro, 1998).

What Have Researchers Concluded about Existing State Standards?

There have been significant efforts to appraise the usefulness and comparative worth of the state reading standards. Among leading research in the area have been studies by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the Fordham Foundation, and the Council for Basic Education (CBE). Each of those organizations explored the state guidelines in terms of such qualities as soundness, rigor, clarity, and specificity (Stoicheva, 1999).

A 1996 investigation of 28 sets of state reading and language arts standards by the AFT found all of them to be unsatisfactory. The AFT report, entitled "Making Standards Matter 1996," found 22 of the sets of guidelines to meet its "common core" criterion, but found only one to have sufficient standards for each grade and none to reflect adequately clustered standards (Gandal, 1996).

In 1997 the Fordham Foundation itself examined state reading standards, using some of the same sets of state guidelines as did the AFT report, as well as some updated ones. Fordham's research reached similarly negative conclusions, finding that only 10 states' standards were above the statistical mean of the study. Of the standards examined, however, none was found to identify required readings or specific titles to clarify difficulty level or the body of knowledge to be assessed at each level. Eighteen of the documents placed below the mean, five of which also were identified in the AFT research as failing to achieve the common core criterion. The Fordham researchers found two basic problems with the state standards: the seemingly misplaced faith in the ability of young children to understand their own culture and other cultures; and an undue emphasis on the impermanence and variability of the English language (Stotsky, 1997).

In research for the CBE, Jofus and Berman evaluated state standards for both mathematics and English language arts. The Council's report considered language arts standards for 42 states. Of those, 28 states were found to have rigorous or very rigorous standards. Many of the states' guidelines, however, were found inadequate in that they failed to address the following areas: specific reading requirements (how much and what types of reading are expected of students); literature study (reading from particular periods or genres); student research (gathering information from various sources and crediting others' ideas); and language study (examining word origins, slang, etc.). The CBE team concluded that for standards to succeed, they must be high, but not unreachable, specific, but not directive, and they must be clear. Teachers must demand that students meet the standards, and they must provide the guidance students need to achieve that goal. In working toward that end, the researchers concluded, teachers and students would need the support of parents, school administrators, districts, and states (Jofus & Berman, 1998).

How Should, and How Do, State Standards Affect Ways in Which Teachers Teach?

As states work to develop standards for reading and language arts instruction and learning, what needs for improvement emerge? Wixson and Dutro examined this issue for the Center for Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). The researchers based their findings on an examination of 14 states' reading standards for grades kindergarten through three. Applying content analysis methods to the standards, Wixson and Dutro identified a set of conclusions paired with recommendations, including: (1) the need for more specific standards and objectives for achievement in the early grades; (2) the necessity of conceptualizing reading in a way that makes curriculum, instruction, assessment and reporting manageable, without oversimplifying; (3) the desirability of striking a balance between sufficient state guidance and local flexibility; (4) the need to provide a viable curricular path over grade levels; and (5) the value of assuring that content is appropriate for particular grade levels (Wixson & Dutro, 1998).

In subsequent CIERA research employing a combination of policy analyses, psychometric measures, and literacy policy studies, Valencia and Wixson investigated ways in which state standards and assessment affected instruction and learning. They concluded that the relationship "between language arts policy and practice are complex and at least partly dependent on the knowledge, beliefs, goals and experience of the administrators and teachers who work with these types of policy tools." The researchers suggested further that there is a need to understand policy implementation both on the system level and in the daily lives of teachers and students, and that without some form of professional development, the effects of policy could be highly variable (Valencia & Wixson, 1999).

What Constitutes Effective English Language Arts Standards?

In a 1997 article for *Reading Horizons*, Heidi Anne Mesmer examined four states' language arts standards, using the NCTE/IRA guidelines as a point of comparison. Mesmer looked at the structure and content of the standards for Colorado, Florida, Michigan, and New Hampshire. Mesmer contended that the prescriptive "list" style of the some of the state standards, particularly those of Florida and Colorado, may have the effect of restricting teacher creativity, whereas the less specific standards such as Michigan's appeared to lend themselves to greater flexibility. In terms of content, Mesmer found a remarkable similarity in the four states' emphasis on such concepts and skills as the use of varied strategies in decoding and comprehension, construction of meaning from text, and conventions of language. Equally striking was the common omission of the entire subject of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Specific aspects of the content of the various guidelines did suggest divergent approaches and emphases. Ultimately, Mesmer concluded that no matter how they are written or organized, the state standards would have only a limited impact on students (Mesmer, 1997).

State Standards: Where Are We Heading?

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's 1998 report on state standards was not the organization's final word on the topic. Two years later, following further revisions in state standards, the foundation took another look at the topic. In adjusting the standards' overall grade from a "D+" for 1998 to a "C-" for the year 2000, the foundation identified some areas of improvement: (1) state standards were becoming more specific and measurable; (2) content was "making a comeback" in that states were less reluctant to dictate particular subject matter for schools; and (3) states were less "enamored of national standards promoted by professional organizations." In the view of the foundation report's authors, most states still could not legitimately claim to embrace standards-based reforms, and the states needed to improve both academic standards and accountability.

In the view of the 2000 Fordham report, there remained considerable room for improvement. Only five of the 42 states in its study, namely Alabama, California, Texas, and North and South Carolina, were judged as combining solid standards with sufficient degrees of accountability. Thirty states were seen to have inadequate (or no) accountability, while 12 had sufficient accountability, but inferior standards.

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As Mesmer suggested, the organization of the state standards reflects both their uses and their audiences. Their style reflects certain attitudes about teaching and learning, while content reveals balance between innovation and consensus. Standards underscore what those who care about education view as important and valuable, and serve as a starting point for further discussion of good practice (Mesmer, 1997).

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